

## CHAPTER FIVE: GOD HELP US

### From Bill O'Reilly's *Who's Looking Out For You*

Somebody up there likes me.

-Rocky Marciano

IF THE DEITY isn't looking out for us, well, the landscape turns mighty bleak, if you ask me. Faith, hope, and charity, the antidotes to evil and the forces of darkness, are so strong that all three affirmations are needed if civilization is going to continue. There is no question that religious zealotry has brought the world pain and suffering, but without the hope of eternal life, not to mention infallible justice, eventually dog-eats-dog turns into human-exploits-human.

For centuries, all members of the O'Reilly clan have been baptized Roman Catholics, whether the Church wants to admit it or not. (After my reporting on Cardinal Law the Church was not pleased.) From the time that I could walk, I've gone to mass on Sunday and have respected my religion. I am, I believe, among a minority of journalists who actually attend church on a regular basis. But judging by the stares I get when I leave mass early, I am not enhancing the image of my profession.

Since I have talked about my religion on the air, I am often asked by skeptical correspondents how I can hold on to such traditions, especially when I hammered the Catholic Church over the sex-abuse scandals (more on that later). I love those questions. Here's what I told the Saturday Evening Post: "People say, 'Why do you go to church?' I say, 'Why not? What is a better use of my time? For an hour a week, I can think about things of a spiritual nature in a nice church with beautiful sculptures and stained glass windows and a 2,000-year-old tradition that makes sense. Why would I not go?"

"What's the downside of going? What if there is no God? Well, so what? If there is no God, I'm dead. It doesn't matter, OK? I'm looking at it like, 'What's to lose? What's the problem here?' If the theology is positive, if it is designed to help people, and I believe in that philosophy, why would I not embrace that? Now that being said, do I do everything the bishop tells me to do? Certainly I don't. He's a human being; he's not somebody who has sway over me. I can't understand that about atheists. Is there nothing you can embrace? Do you know more than everybody else and can you explain every mystery of nature? Why would you be so definite in the fact that there isn't a God? It doesn't make any sense."

I figured out early on that I was not nearly smart enough to understand the vagaries of the universe, so I threw in with the Supreme Being. Thus, faith was not a struggle for me. My logic is simple: Everything man is involved with is imperfect. But nature works all the time. It never breaks down. It never fails to show up. The sun comes up, the sun goes down. The tide rolls in, the tide goes out. Seasons change, people die, babies are born. Sure, destructive storms and fires descend, but new growth begins almost immediately. Nature is perfect, so man could not possibly have anything to do with it. You don't have to memorize Ecclesiastes to figure that out.

With the renewing cycle of life staring all human beings in the face, it is incumbent upon us to analyze things further. If Big Bang theorists are right, the entire universe was about the size of an acorn fifteen billion years ago; everything in existence was produced when that cosmic seed exploded. What human being could make that happen? Look around. You can build a table, for example, out of existing natural materials. You cannot create anything out of nothing. Not even an acorn.

If you are a nonbeliever, I respect that, but I also urge you to consider data from the scientific community. A six-year study of four thousand Americans at Duke University found that those who prayed regularly had healthier immune systems than those who did not. And it makes sense. Putting your faith in a higher power is a release; it is therapeutic, especially when things beyond human control, like disease or accidents, happen. Praying brings solace and relief. Trusting that things happen for a reason is a major stress buster.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes an element of "hustle" in the religious world, with various faiths competing with and even hating each other. This, of course, is absurd. I respect all religions that espouse goodwill toward men. I am not a missionary and will not tap on your window urging you to embrace Jesus. I believe that all human beings are equal in God's sight and all sincere beliefs that do not cause injury are acceptable under heaven.

Right away this philosophy puts me at odds with many who believe that if you don't believe what they do, you are bound for Hades. I could never figure this one out either. If a human being lives a good life, holds sincere beliefs, but just happens to be a Hindu, an all-just and all-merciful God is going to set the guy on fire for eternity? I don't think so.

It is this harsh, judgmental approach espoused by some true believers that has made religion in general a tough sell in the modern industrialized world. Many Americans and Europeans react furiously when a moral code is imposed on them. But sometimes the moralist is really looking out for you. However, it is also true that the more freedom a society has, the more difficult it is to listen to someone tell you what to do. Which, of course, is why Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalists often do not embrace a free society, preferring the "my way or the die way" theological tradition.

So here's the question we are here to discuss: Does organized religion look out for you? And the answer is not definitive. Sometimes religion can be good and sometimes it can be bad. It is how you incorporate religion into your life that provides the best answer to the question. Use theology to help others and comfort yourself, it becomes a good thing. But use it to belittle and mock others, or to punish yourself, then it is pernicious.

IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES, we do actually enjoy full freedom of religion in this country But publicly that is no longer so in America. Because of the rise of secularism, a philosophy that argues there is no room for spirituality in the public arena, religious expression in public is under pressure from some in the media and, of course, from the intolerant secularists who hold power in many different quarters. They are definitely not looking out for you.

One of the biggest frauds ever foisted upon the American people is the issue of separation of church and state. The American Civil Liberties Union, along with legal secularists like Supreme Court justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Paul Stevens, are using the Constitution to bludgeon any form of public spirituality. This insidious strategy goes against everything the Founding Fathers hoped to achieve in forming a free, humane society.

I said "fraud," and I meant it. Let's look at some historical facts. There is no question that Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and most of the other framers encouraged spirituality in our public discourse. Letters written by these great men show that they believed social stability could be achieved only by a people who embraced a moral God. Time after time in debating the future of America, the Founders pointed out that only a "moral" and "God-fearing" people could meet the demands of individual freedom. That makes perfect sense, because a society that has no fear of God relies solely on civil authority for guidance. But that guidance can and has broken down. All great philosophers, even the atheists, realized that one of the essential attributes of a civilized people is a belief that good will be rewarded and evil will be punished.

In 1781, Jefferson said the following words, which are engraved on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?"

I wonder what Jefferson would think of the ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California that the word God is unconstitutional in the Pledge of Allegiance. I also wonder what of Tom would think of the American Civil Liberties Union suing school districts all over the country to ban the use of the word "God" in school-sanctioned speech. Here's how ridiculous this whole thing is: At McKinley High School in Honolulu, an official school poem has been recited on ceremonial occasions since 1927. One of the lines mentions a love for God. After the ACLU threatened a lawsuit, that poem was banned from public recitation, a seventy-five-year tradition dissolved within a few weeks.

This is tragic insanity. To any intellectually honest person, it is apparent that the Founders wanted very much to keep God in the public arena, even uppermost in the thoughts of the populace. What the Founders did not want was any one religion imposed by the government. Jefferson, and Madison in particular, were suspicious of organized religion and of some of the zealots who assumed power in faith-based organizations. But the Founders kept it simple: All law-abiding religions were allowed to practice, but the government would not favor any one above another.

At the same time, Jefferson in his wisdom predicted that some of the things he and the others wanted for the new country would eventually come under fire. On September 6, 1819, he wrote: "The Constitution ... is a mere thing of wax in the hands of the judiciary, which they may twist and shape into any form they please."

How prophetic is that? Right now we have well-funded and extremely litigious groups of anti-spirituality people running wild in the U.S.A., and a number of judges are in their pockets. Led by the incredibly vicious ACLU, they are suing towns, school boards, states, and municipalities to wipe out any public displays relating to heavenly matters.

In addition to the Hawaii case, there have been dozens of other disturbing developments: In Georgia, the ACLU sued to get the words Christmas holiday taken off a school district's calendar, the antispirituality fanatics demanding the words winter holiday be substituted. But President Grant did not sign legislation making "winter holiday" a federal day off. No, he signed into law the "Christmas holiday." Nevertheless, the ACLU's bullying legal tactics succeeded in that case.

In Alabama, civil libertarians sued to get the Ten Commandments removed from a state courtroom. They won. You know about the Pledge of Allegiance suit in California, and I could give you hundreds of other examples. In New Jersey, the secularists even stopped schoolkids from seeing A Christmas Carol, based upon the Charles Dickens novel. The kids went to see some cartoon instead.

And the most insane incident of all occurred in New Mexico, where secularists demanded that the town of Las Cruces change its name. Las Cruces means "the cross." (It's still Las Cruces. And the upstate New York town of Fishkill is still called that despite the efforts of animal rights crazies to have it legally changed.)

What must Benjamin Franklin think as he looks down from Heaven? In 1787, Franklin delivered a stirring speech at the Constitutional Convention in which he said: "I therefore beg leave to move—that henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service."

Prayers? Before a public debate? Clergy? Some Supreme Court justices are gagging on their gavels. And those jurists must really hate 1787, because also in that year the Northwest Ordinance was passed to govern the territories not yet admitted into the Union. Article III of that ordinance states: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools, and the means of education shall be forever encouraged."

Forever? Religion? Schools? Holy water, Batman! Does this mean that the media and the secularist judges and the intrusively dishonest ACLU have all lied to us? That's exactly what it means, Robin.

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LET'S TAKE A LOOK at those Ten Commandments. Boy, the federal courts don't want you to see those on any government property, no way. But wait, there's a signpost up ahead. It was written by James Madison, the guiding force behind the language of the Constitution. Said Madison: "We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to THE TEN COMMANDMENTS." (My emphasis.)

President Madison knew, as did all his founding brothers, that a precise moral code was necessary to set boundaries for everyday life. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her pals want to erase those boundaries and allow those in power to govern solely by manmade law. But that is impossible. No government can police individual behavior on a massive scale. Either a society has morals or it turns into the Mongol hordes. The way the U.S.A. is going, you might want to start taking riding lessons.

It should be abundantly clear that the antispirituality forces in this country are on a tear. The trend began in June 2000, when a 6-to-3 Supreme Court decision held that a student in a Texas public school violated the Constitution by offering a public prayer before a football game. Interestingly, the entire student body in the school had voted on the student who would deliver the prayer. It was considered a great honor.

Writing for the majority, justice John Paul Stevens opined in part, "School sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible." Yet a national poll on the situation found that two out of three Americans thought that the prayer should be permitted.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist, one of the three dissenting judges, summed up the situation this way: "Even more disturbing than its holding is the tone of the court's opinion; it bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life."

That is absolutely true. In every debate about public spirituality, the secularists spin the issue and equate God with the legal concept of religion. The two are separate, and here's some legal proof. God is a spiritual being. Witches and Wiccans are recognized religious groups. They reject God.

The United States was founded on Judeo-Christian philosophy, not a particular religion. As Madison pointed out, in order for a just society to exist, Americans must behave according to an established moral code, and they chose the Ten Commandments as a good model. That is the logic of the situation. A philosophy that citizens must love and fear a higher power and love their neighbors as themselves encourages civility on a mass scale. As I mentioned, the Founders knew America would never survive the challenges of freedom if spirituality was not a part of the nation's fabric.

Yet the spirituality and philosophy of the Founding Fathers have now been beaten to a pulp by the hyperaggressive forces of the secular opposition. They have waged a successful campaign to convince millions of Americans that public spirituality is "noninclusive" and therefore offensive. They have succeeded mightily in burying the true tenor of this country: That there is a right and wrong. That everyone is entitled to pursue happiness while receiving the protection of an effective and responsible federal government that understands the intent of the Constitution and those who forged it.

But why have the secularists launched their jihad? Well, the primary reason is that they do not want personal conduct to be judged. That's what this holy war is all about. If spirituality is encouraged in the public arena, then questions about violent crime, corrupting media products, drug use, abortion, sexual behavior, conspicuous consumption, irresponsible parental conduct, and a myriad of other personal issues will be raised. Above all, the secularists do not want that. They want a moral free-fire zone in the U.S.A., where consenting adults can do just about anything in the name of personal freedom. It is not an accident or a coincidence that as moral imperatives have broken down, the number of American children born out of wedlock has skyrocketed in the past decade. And that is the primary cause of poverty and crime. We'll deal with this shocking situation later on in Chapter Eight.

From their experiences in Europe, the Founding Fathers knew that a lax approach to personal behavior leads to decadence and decay. The Founders wanted moral boundaries and standards of behavior set at the local level. They did not want the excesses of England under the Hanovers or France under Louis XVI.

But tyrant Louis would love secular America here in the early part of the twenty-first century. Our dismissal of spirituality in the public schools and the embracing of secular values and thought throughout society would have greatly cheered mad King George III as well as loopy Louis and his greedy wife, Marie Antoinette. But America is paying a heavy price for letting the good times roll, a price seen most vividly in the behavior of children and especially public high school students.

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IN 2002, THE Josephson Institute of Ethics issued an updated study entitled "The Ethics of American Youth." The California think tank surveyed twelve thousand American high school students and found a serious deterioration in moral conduct over the past ten years. Here are some of the lowlights:

**Cheating:** In the decade from 1992 to 2001, the number of high school students who admitted cheating on an exam increased from 61 percent to 74 percent-three-quarters of the high school population!

**Theft:** 38 percent of high schoolers admitted shoplifting at least once in the previous twelve months; that was up from 33 percent in 1992.

**Lying:** An astounding 93 percent of teenagers admitted lying to their parents. In 1992, the number stood at 83 percent.

Michael Josephson, president of the institute, told me that his study proved without a doubt that a willingness to cheat has become the norm among young Americans. Are their parents to blame for the trend? Here's a surprise: Josephson's study found that kids who cheat, lie, and steal say that their parents would disapprove of their actions. In fact, 84 percent of all students said, "My parents want me to do the ethically right thing, no matter what the cost."

So what's going on here? It's obvious to me that the parental wish is being ignored because the secular media and educational system often steamroll over parental advice. When peer pressure dictates that immoral conduct is acceptable, immoral conduct will rule. There is no question about this. And in the rejection of vouchers, which would allow low-income American parents to choose schools based not only on educational standards but also upon the moral atmosphere, the politicians have sold out our most vulnerable families. Think about it: Are the antivoucher people looking out for the kids? Or for the entrenched public school teachers unions and administrations? Roughly two-thirds of black American parents favor school vouchers. What say you, Bill Clinton, our nation's "first black president"? What say you, Edward Kennedy, often described as the champion of the poor?

The irony here is that while the secularists are winning the God-in-public-life controversy, America remains a very religious nation. We are not Sweden. A Gallup Poll reports that 85 percent of Americans consider themselves Christian, and some 70 percent are members of a church or synagogue or mosque. More than 90 percent of Americans believe in God.

And we Americans are active practitioners of our faiths. Sixty percent of us attend religious services at least once a month, while 40 percent go weekly. Add up all the data, and the percentage of those who feel that God is important in their lives overwhelms the percentage of those who don't. But the power does not lie with those religious people, who remain under siege.

In contrast, there is a kind of society where belief in God plays no role whatsoever, as characterized a half century ago by Whittaker Chambers, the man who blew the whistle on Alger Hiss: "The Communist vision is the vision of man without God. It is the vision of man's mind displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world." It was Chambers, once a dedicated Communist, who suddenly realized one day that the miraculous, delicate beauty of his young child's ear was clearly the handiwork of a higher being. He renounced communism because he recognized that "man's mind" could not be "the creative intelligence of the world."

But conversion anecdotes will never change the minds of the antispiritual forces, and the battering ram that is the legal system will continue to smash down public utterances and displays of spirituality until the religious population organizes and strikes back. Where is the AACLU, the anti-American Civil Liberties Union? I mean, come on, the ACLU drapes the Constitution all over itself, but a strong argument can be made that they are antiAmerican in the deepest sense-as outlined above. Their true agenda is a secular society. So my question is: Where are the countersuits? Where are the voices of opposition to secularism? Right now they are found primarily on the Christian right, which has been demonized, pardon the pun, as fanatically extreme because of its tendency to condemn its opposition to hellfire.

Believe me, I know. Many letters to The Factor give me clear road maps to the devil's den-and suggest I'm headed there. The unrecognized bitter truth about God and America is that organized religion is scared. The churches don't want to say anything that might endanger their tax-exempt status. They stay out of politics; they actively practice the doctrine of separation of church and state. But that doesn't mean that good people who believe in the presence of public spirituality have to stay out of the fray. As the Isley Brothers sang, "Fight the Power." And right now the ACLU has the power and is using it to pulverize American tradition and the true intentions of the Founding Fathers.

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NOWHERE IS THE civil impotence of religion in the U.S.A. better demonstrated than by the Catholic Church. A whopping 65 million Americans are Catholics, almost 25 percent of the population. Yet the Catholic Church in America, which used to be a tremendous force for effective social change, is now on the defensive and, in many quarters, is an object of public derision. Do you know why? Because the Catholic Church stopped looking out for the folks, that's why. Its leadership is made up primarily of elderly white men who have spent their lives playing politics and currying favor with the conservative zealots in the Vatican.

Cardinal Law in Boston, Cardinal Mahony in Los Angeles, and Cardinal Egan in New York are all men of guile, power players who enjoy their wealth and influence. I could list scores of bishops who play the same kind of callous game-that is, amassing power and money while completely forgetting the mission that Jesus died to promote. In my diocese on Long Island, Bishop William Murphy, a protege of the despised Cardinal Law, spent almost a million dollars refurbishing a private residence where he lives alone. I mean, Hugh Hefner would love this place. So who's Bishop Murphy looking out

for? Not the parishioners. By the way, in order to secure his private palace, Murphy "relocated" some elderly nuns who were living in the building before he was installed as bishop. Unfortunately, these good sisters missed the new wine cellar and brand-new top-of-the-line kitchen appliances. Maybe Murphy will have them over for dinner. With such leadership, it should come as no surprise that the clerical sex scandal broke wide open. With a few exceptions, like Archbishop Sheehan in New Mexico and now Phoenix, Catholic leadership in America is made up of venal, self-absorbed men who embrace the daily philosophy of "cover my butt." When Cardinal Law learned of abusive priests, did he leap up in outrage, throw out the perverts, and call the cops? No, he did none of those things, according to his own sworn testimony. Instead, he kept the situation quiet so it wouldn't hurt his standing in Rome.

Thus his solution to child molestation by his priests was to pay the victims off and have them sign a nondisclosure agreement. Then he'd send the priest to rehab and reassign the pervert when he got out so he could be pronounced "cured." That policy, of course, led to the brutalization of hundreds more children, but did Law care? He dodged and weaved and attacked the press until finally the evidence became so overwhelming that he was publicly humiliated. Then he said he was sorry. But even after the crimes and payoffs became public, the Vatican refused to take aggressive action against Law and the other perversion enablers.

And so the reputation of the Catholic Church in America arrived where it is today-completely down the drain. The devil and his disciples are thrilled with this series of events, and Jesus must be weeping. He commanded his followers to seek out afflicted children and comfort them. Did Cardinal Law miss that lesson? And what about Pope John Paul? Where was his outrage? In fact, the Pontiff even refused to meet with some of the sexual abuse victims when he traveled to Canada in 2002. (The Pope also alienated millions of Americans with his stand on Saddam Hussein and the war to remove him. We'll deal with that in the next chapter.)

The self-destruction of the American Catholic Church leaves the field wide open for the antispirituality forces to march in and do what they will. With the Church now lacking in any moral authority outside its own core, the loudest argument in town belongs to the freedom-from-religion spokespeople. And they are winning big.

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FINALLY, LET ME tell you how my opinions on God and country were formed. My mother really wanted me to be an altar boy, and, for once, I went along with the program. Actually, I didn't have much choice because my father's six-foot-three-inch frame upheld this decision. He made the Supreme Court look like the Brady Bunch.

So by age ten I was assisting the priest in the Latin mass. Even though I had no idea what I was saying, I memorized lines like "cum spiritu tuo" and a myriad of other responses in the language of Caesar. As an added bonus, my altar boy stint was profitable because we got tipped a few bucks for assisting at weddings and funerals. And, hedonistic lads that we were, we quickly figured out there was good money to be made if the right methods were used. For example, the funeral home guys were the cheapest SOBs in town.

I mean, these guys would scoop up loose change in an outhouse. Many times they would "forget" to provide the saintly altar boys with the expected gratuity for performing the funeral ceremony with dignity and compassion. On occasions like these I, having control of the incense pot, might become just a tad bit exuberant with it, causing large clouds of smoke to form over the grieving congregation. Of course, the priest would shoot me a dirty look, but the message was sent: The living must be taken care of. Similarly, weddings were cash cows, but the mooing could be loud or soft depending on the groom and best man. They were the ones who tipped the priest and the two altar boys who assisted at the mass. One of the altar boys, always me, held the gold plate on which the rings were placed. If the gratuity was smallish, a small mention might be made of my sprained wrist and the kind of pain I would be enduring during the ceremony. Of course, the wrist could be steadier with a little inducement. It always came, and Father O'Malley usually got a few more bucks as well. I never had any trouble with the priests, and a few of them were actually good guys.

All the altar boys went to Father Ellard for confession because he was the local prison chaplain and, after what he heard in there, we figured our peccadilloes were insignificant. Father Ellard was also very, very old and couldn't really hear much. Obviously, this was a win-win situation, and even dastardly sins like making out with some girl usually drew a simple penance consisting of a few Hail Marys and Our Fathers. We all knew what priests to avoid. One named Father Tierney was a mean guy, and if you hit your sister or something, the guy could have you saying a couple of rosaries on a sunny day (rosary prayers take about twenty minutes to say if you slur the words). Tierney was also a boozier, and you could

smell his brand right through the confessional screen. One time he really got on my case over an apple I confessed throwing at a car. I didn't even hit the car, but Tierney was going wild. "Do you realize this is the devil's work?" he asked. "Sure, Father, he's zeroing in on me and some serial killers." That's what I should have said. Instead, I thought an evil thought about Father Tierney, thereby racking up a new sin even as I was getting rid of the old ones. It wasn't easy being Catholic.

As I got older, I saw differences between our altar boy crew and some of the neighborhood guys who had no formal religion in their lives. The differences came on two fronts: First, in my Catholic grammar school there were constant programs designed to help people and promote generosity. Even though my friends and I often mocked these attempts, the lessons were not lost on most of us. The sixty kids in my class at St. Brigid's School looked out for one another; intense conflict was rare. We didn't engage in ferocious fights like the ones we saw across the street at the public school. Generosity was part of the curriculum, while the brainwashing nuns pounded on us to think of others before ourselves.

One quick anecdote about the nuns. In sixth grade I got into a fight with one of the teacher's pets, a guy named Tommy Massey. It was just a little pushing and shoving, but because I was an everyday offender and Massey was on the fast track to Heaven, I took the fall. My sentence was to spend three days in solitary confinement in the convent-that's the place where the nuns live. I was given "busywork" and left alone all day long. The only supervision came from a housebound nun named Sister Gerardo, who was ninety- nine if she was a day. She was supposed to make sure I did my work and didn't steal anything.

I was not real pleased about the situation and plotted my revenge. On the last day of my suspension, I snuck out of my assigned room and saw that Sister Gerardo had entered the land of nod. She was actually snoring, a sound

I'd never imagined could emanate from a nun. Seizing the moment, I crept out of the room and quietly mounted the stairs into the living quarters of a half dozen sisters! This was a major, mortal sin, but it was too late, I was there. The doors of all the rooms were open, and I remember everything was very neat. I couldn't tell which nun had which room, but I had to make a statement. So I walked into one of the rooms, removed some nun stuff, and put it under the bed in another room. I then tiptoed back downstairs. Of course, I told all my classmates about it the next day. But something very strange happened. Nobody believed me, and I obviously couldn't prove it. So I did this bold thing hoping for massive adulation and nobody cared! And not only that, for the next month every time the teacher called my name I jumped up in a paranoid frenzy. It was agony and a punishment from God. But, interestingly, I never was called on it, and if I had been, I was all set to blame Sister Gerardo.

The second advantage we in Catholic school had was a structure born of tradition. There was always something going on. Our days featured adventurous stories about heroic martyrs and missionaries such as St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. There were Christmas pageants, Easter parades, and movies about miracles. As I came to admire the legacy of my religion, it was actually fun to learn about villains like Judas and Herod. We all admired heroes like St. Peter, who was crucified upside down at his own request because he felt he wasn't worthy of dying the same way Jesus did.

During my teenage years, being a practicing Catholic really paid off. I was kind of awkward around girls because of the occasion of sin it represented, and envied some of the public-school guys who were operators. But I didn't envy them when they got their girlfriends pregnant and had to marry in their teens. That happened to my cousin Eddie. He was always considered a cool guy at his public high school. He would die in his early forties from acute alcoholism, after struggling with the bottle his entire adult life. This is not to say that self-destructive and foolish behavior didn't visit Catholic-school kids as well. It did, but not in the same degree and not with me (well, at least the self- destructive stuff didn't happen).

When drugs swept through my neighborhood, I wouldn't dare and didn't care. I instinctively knew they were bad on every level. But my public school friend and chess partner Michael K. didn't have the same inhibition or point of view. He became addicted to heroin. He also died in his forties. My saving grace, pun intended, is that I understood at a very young age that my religion looked out for me, and that Jesus was a good man. At the same time, I never, ever tried to convert nonbelievers, and respected the rights of every person to hold other beliefs. (Although I have to admit that we Catholics got a little teed off when half the neighborhood stickball team had to leave in the fifth inning to attend Hebrew school.) Something about the boundaries imposed by my parents and my religion saved me.

Many of my more secular childhood friends are dead or emotionally destroyed. Most working-class neighborhoods have a high failure rate. With my genes, had I not been born a Catholic, my life would have been much tougher. My religion, not any specific priest or nun, looked out for me because I took what was good and positive about it and used it as a shield. And I still do to this day. EVEN SO, would not call myself a holy guy. I am a sinner, but I do cast stones anyway.

That will make my meeting with St. Peter very interesting. Perhaps the biggest stone I am hurling now is in the direction of the secularists. Because even though my upbringing was rough-hewn, kids today have much more intense temptations to deal with. Beaver Cleaver has been replaced by Snoop Dogg. Children are under siege. With no moral shield, millions of American kids will fail just like my cousin Eddie and my pal Michael. The secularists don't care; they want children to be at the mercy of a materialistic society and a greedy media. They want kids to rely solely on parents who are often irresponsible and self-destructive. Right now all we can do is pray for the kids and fight the secularists hand to hand. And if you want some empirical evidence to back up that opinion, listen to this: A study of college students seeking psychological counseling has found that their emotional difficulties are far more complex and more severe than those observed in the past.

Researchers at Kansas State University studied students from 1989 to 2001 and concluded that those seeking help for depression doubled during that time period. Also, the percentage of students taking some type of psychiatric medication increased twofold. That trend is not limited just to Kansas. In a 2002 national survey, more than 80 percent of 274 directors of counseling centers said they thought the number of students with severe psychological disorders had increased over the previous five years. Now, you can argue all day long why this is happening, but I'll give you one huge reason: Many young Americans simply do not have a force in their lives that can relieve their emotional suffering. They are drifting away from our religious traditions-and religion can be that force, at least in part. If you are able to believe that a higher power will look out for you and will balance bad times with good times, your stress level will not get out of control. Religious faith is generally bad for the "shrink" business, but honest mental health workers know what's going on. "People just don't seem to have the resources to draw upon emotionally to the degree that they used to," the director of counseling at the University of Nebraska, Dr. Robert Pomeroy, told the New York Times. "What would once have been a difficult patch for someone is now a full-blown crisis." The rise in dysfunction parallels the rise in secularism, no question about it.

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THERE'S ONE MORE aspect of the religion controversy that needs to be addressed: the selective favoring of a certain religion in the name of "diversity." This usually goes on beneath the radar screen, but an incident at the University of North Carolina blew the cover off this trend.

I do believe the Founding Fathers were absolutely correct in demanding that no public authority in the United States favor a specific religion. So I was distressed to hear that in the fall of 2002, the administration at UNC was going to require all incoming freshmen to read a book entitled *Approaching the Koran: The Early Revelations*. The book is a sanitized version of Koranic philosophy, concentrating on lyrical stories and poetic lore. It's a very interesting book, but there's no way it should be mandatory reading in any public school. Just imagine the outcry if any school demanded that students read Bible Highlights or Nice Stuff from the Torah. I mean, the ACLU would be setting itself on fire in protest- figuratively speaking, of course. But the ACLU was strangely mute when UNC issued its reading list.

So what was really going on here? Well, the backlash from 9/11 was hurting many law-abiding Islamic Americans, and the philosophy of "diversity" was taking some hits. So the University of North Carolina decided to set a proactive example and require students to read a book that is favorable to Islam. The intent was good, but it was a direct violation of the separation concept because it required students to learn about the positive aspects of a

specific religion while ignoring the negative aspects. That's religious advocacy, not intellectual discipline. And that's not allowed in a publicly funded university in the U.S.A. The force behind the Islamic reading selection was UNC professor Dr. Robert Kirkpatrick. On July 10, 2002, he entered the No Spin Zone on *The O'Reilly Factor*. I've condensed some of our debate, but the main points are these:

O'REILLY: The problem here is that this is indoctrination of religion.

KIRKPATRICK: No, it has nothing to do with that. It's a text that studies the poetic structure of the Koran and seeks to explain why it has such an effect on two billion people in the world.



O'REILLY: UNC never gave incoming freshman a book on the Bible to read.

KIRKPATRICK: We assume that most people coming to the University of North Carolina are already familiar with both the Old and New Testaments.

O'REILLY: But if you did do that, there'd be an outcry all over the country.

The professor had no answer for that. Soon after, under pressure from the North Carolina legislature, UNC dropped the book from its required reading list. Approaching the Koran became an optional reading assignment, as it should have been all along. And I'll go one step further: If the book was mandatory reading in a theology or history class, I would have had no problem with it. But forcing all incoming freshmen to read any book praising a specific religion does violate the mandate that public universities have to live by in order to receive tax dollars. There's an interesting side note to the controversy.

As I said, the ACLU was MIA during the UNC brouhaha (I love all those initials). Also, most other media did not cover the story as aggressively as we did. As part of our analysis, we rejected the argument that reading the Koran book would help us get to know the world that the 9/11 killers inhabited. Number one, I don't think the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad have anything to do with homicide and terrorism. And second, I reject the argument that you have to digest a book of poetry and religious interpretation in order to "know" your enemy. I said this to Professor Kirkpatrick: "[As a UNC freshman] I wouldn't read the book.

And if I were going to the university in 1941, I wouldn't have read Mein Kampf either." Kirkpatrick asked why. "Because it's tripe," I answered. The next day a number of Muslim websites wrote that I compared the Koran to Mein Kampf, the usual vile propaganda some of these sites spew out. What can you do?

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IT SHOULD BE obvious to clear-thinking Americans that spirituality and Judeo-Christian philosophy were main ingredients in the dense fabric of ideas that became the Constitution. Simply put, historical revisionists and antireligious fanatics are tearing down what the Founders relied upon: moral clarity. And the courts are allowing them to get away with it, proving that the courts are not looking out for you, the American citizen.

As far as your personal religious conviction, that is completely up to you. But I will say this: Used in the correct way, religion can be a force that makes your life more worthwhile. It can make the bad times bearable and the good times more satisfying. Spirituality looks out for you because it brings you out of yourself and into a realm where the welfare of other people becomes as important as your own. And as we've discussed previously, that kind of worldview will allow you to build relationships with people who will indeed look out for you even as you are looking out for them.